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Dis-eases of Secrecy – Tracing history, memory and justice, by Brian Rappert and Chandré Gould - Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2017. 288 (pps), R280 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4314-2485-6

Ostensibly, this unusual book is a critique of South Africa's 'Project Coast' – a top secret biological and chemical weapons programme evolved during the apartheid years between 1981-1995. It is also a valuable historical record, deconstructing the dubious history of a repressive regimes' search for new repressive tools. It is a narrative recording of apartheid's preparation to use chemical weapons such as CR gas, mass production of ecstasy, the development of toxins undetectable to post mortems, and new chemical tools for covert assassination. But it is much more about how researchers can go about uncovering the secrecy surrounding ultra-sensitive projects, that many of those involved would prefer to forget. It provides a guide to how forensic archaeology can uncover evidence that eluded even the famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The book does not have chapters in the conventional sense but rather 11 themes and a number of highlighted entries which contain significant nuggets of information. These are woven together by "sewn threads". This means that the book can be read several ways, including chronologically and thematically. It is a clever device since real life research by the likes of Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) inspectors is never straightforward.

The authors capture the convolutions of this sort of research by saying "What is known often amounts to an incomplete vestige, which points somewhere else for a fuller account." (Introduction -page xiii) They frame this as somehow characteristic of doing research in what are often highly forbidden and secretive areas, but at other times where evidence is hidden in plain sight.

The book features a complex set of journeys where the focus on individuals such as Dr Wouter Basson, is seen as detracting from investigation of the roles of many other prominent figures who had operational responsibilities. The authors focus on the deeper issues of Project Coast and demonstrate how to go about an inquiry where the issues are explosive and cover toxic weapons, mass killings via drugging and execution, dumping bodies at sea, corruption, collusion and denial. Going wider, the authors examine issues such as South Africa's use of the incapacitant CR, an agent developed at Porton Down and involving primary research in medical schools at British Universities like Manchester, in the 1970s.

The book's unusual structure makes reading it akin to entering a labyrinth, with no set outcome but a dizzying experience which is ultimately heuristic. That is what research feels like in these domains, never a full picture, always an incomplete mosaic. The reader is exposed to narratives and evidence covering many aspects of the story: What actually happened? What are the lived experiences of 'total war'? What processes are involved with 'forgetting and remembering? What are the 'legacies of the past? Who had a 'need to know' and on what basis? Who were the 'victims' – can we ever know? What were the extant 'international relations' associated with this programme? Are the participants agreed on notions of 'best offence' or is it mutual incomprehension? What are the contradictions between 'the silence and the fury? What was involved in 'Transitional justice'? And what can we actually learn in terms of 'lessons from the past'?

Such considerations are the major contribution of this book. On reflection, given the highly secretive nature of the illegal research and deployment of chemical and biological weapons, how can we be sure our interpretations are adequate? Rappert and Gould enter the Project Coast labyrinth and come up with multiple assessments and culpabilities, depending on what precursors and dissembling you chose to challenge or accept. The massive amount of chronological detail they provide prompts a critical appraisal of the process of secrecy itself: how did one university laboratory reframe its

illegal chemical and biological weapons work and present the operation as an animal hospital? How was it that South Africa's offensive chemical and biological warfare programme (including its offensive use of cholera against SWAPO) was not picked up by the media? How come its failure to declare the programme was not picked up by the Biological Weapons Commission?

The book is as much about who keeps silent as about who spills the beans – hence the title. The authors are meticulous in documenting their interviews with many of those who were involved in the Project Coast programme, from funders to key scientists. The end result is deeply unsettling. They fully document a litany of private vices and public virtues all directed towards one outcome – obfuscation of the many interlocking networks of collusion. The book is strongly recommended for any academic, activist or policy maker wishing to make an ethical difference in the shady worlds of arms procurement, legitimisation and control. These worlds are permeated by uneasy ethics and the book is a cautionary tale about what to expect from future challenges to illegal procurement of CBW capacities. Alas, it also represents a marked loss of innocence. The frustration of the authors is palpable. International arms control professionals need to assimilate its findings and develop a more forensic approach for the effective governance and removal of both the weapons themselves and those who illegally innovate and deploy them. Making arms companies and their procurement agencies pay back any fines for corrupt finance from profits made into a UN fund for effective inspection and legal challenge would be a good first step to funding the requisite measures.

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